

Oral history

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What is it?

Extensive in-depth interviews

Often project based around a theme

- Groups of people involved – interviewers, marketers, transcribers, archivists, historians, grantwriters, and narrators
- Projects often organized around an organizational mission
- In organizing a project it is important to become part of the community you are working with— participating in community activities, determining needs that can be met through a project, barriers that need to be overcome, and who the audience of the project will be
- Poorly organized projects result in piles of untranscribed recordings that are ultimately forgotten or discarded

Audiences:

- Inreach – closed internal study for the benefit of the community itself; Smithsonian guide
- Outreach: to inform the larger community

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Questions:

- Who to interview?
- What questions?
- How many interviews?
- What materials are needed?
- Where will materials be archived?
- How will the materials be presented?

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3 broad purposes of oral history:

- 1) Documentary – preserving a piece of history- focus is usually outreach; salvage projects – may be too late; not everything is worth preserving; contemporary significance – not only the past is important; creates a more accurate historical record
“if we ignore today’s youth, we lose that stage of life and its distinctive world view from the historical record or receive it only indirectly through hindsight.” (Howard L. Socks)
- 2) Interpretive – why is what is being documented significant? Phenomenological – How communities change;

The daily life of workers

The day to day experience of discrimination

Balancing college, career, and family

The commons

- 3) Civic – to facilitate civic action; address social problems; documenting history and current life along a waterway in order to encourage public support and funding for redevelopment; documenting the lives of homeless people in communities in order to encourage public support for shelters and rehabilitation

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Planning a project:

- o Focus on a topic – what do you want to find out? Who will know?
- o Projects get sidelined by inadequate resources, lack of community input, inadequate budgets, too many interviewees (a project should have an end point);

The purposes of a clear purpose:

- o Recruiting the right narrators
- o Grant application focus
- o Evaluation

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Questions to guide a plan:

- o What do you want to do
- o Why is it important
- o Who will be involved
- o How long
- o Where will the oral histories be archived
- o What other products will there be – exhibits, books, articles?

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Typical project schedule:

- o Research – developing the purpose and need
- o Planning and budgeting
- o Recruiting narrators
- o Recruiting and training interviewers

- Interviews
- Transcription and editing
- Archiving

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Budget:

- Equipment – recorders, camcorders, microphones, transcription software, computers
- CDs or tape
- Server space
- Acid free boxes and files
- People costs – research, travel, interviewers (if not volunteers), transcription, project administration)

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Researching:

- Understanding the context of the project
- Historical records, newspapers, government reports, agency records
- Participation in the community to become familiar to people
- For 'celebrity' oral histories – reading bios and cvs, what the narrator has written, anything else you can learn about the narrator

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Ethics and politics of oral history:

- Narrators are not necessarily politically correct –which is one reason they were asked to participate
- Interviewers must be prepared to encounter bias, racism, and life styles that they do not subscribe to
- Censorship – media who originally agreed to disseminate may change their minds
- Narrators may edit a transcript beyond recognition
- Interviewers (especially volunteers) represent the project – they need to know that how they behave reflects on the project (PTM majors interviewing in pajamas and flipflops)

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Guidelines for fieldwork:

- Treat others as you would want to be treated
- If the setting becomes uncomfortable –physically or emotionally threatening – leave
- Respect the values and rules of conduct of the community (dress, manners, times not to show up)

- Oral history is not undercover work – never misrepresent who you are or what you are doing
- Do what you say you are going to do – arrive on time, keep within time limits, provide copies as requested
- Keep your interview on track; however don't be so focused that you miss good stories
- Involve the community – what subjects are taboo; when is it inappropriate to call; keep contact with insiders who can guide you

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Copies of release forms and letters: informed consent; IRB

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Interviewing:

Interview is a transaction, not a conversation – the narrator is doing most of the talking and the purpose is to inform an audience;

2 Similarities with psychotherapy: “tell me about your mother”; people who have been through life changing experiences want and need to tell their stories (Katrina);

Interviews are unique –opportunities that don't repeat

Race, gender, and socioeconomic status of both parties may influence how well the interview goes;

Unfamiliarity is not necessarily a barrier (p. 87 bottom – David H. Mould

It is actually easier to ask a stranger to elaborate; you have a reason for not knowing;

Interviews should be one on one; the presence of others may cause self-censorship; also difficult to transcribe multiple voices;

Good to get an introduction through a mutual acquaintance; much less likely that the email will be deleted or the person will hang up;

Provide an outline of the topics to the narrator ahead of time;

Pretest all equipment

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Plan on 60-90 minutes but allow 2 hours

During the recording:

Record in the introduction the name of interviewer, the name of the narrator, brief biographical data (like age/occupation), location of the interview; date of the interview, a summary of the topic, and the title of the project;

Props that can help – photos, scrapbooks, news articles, maps, tools or other objects.

Last – but very important – don't turn off the recorder until you are ready to walk out the door!

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IUPUI Archives –what the product looks like: <https://archives.iupui.edu/handle/2450/5045>